

## Return to The Highlands - Part 1

Like millions of his kinsmen, Scotsman Andy Burgess is keen on golf. Luckily, his professional endeavors keep him close to the game, despite the fact he rarely has the time to play.



*A Look Across Cruden Bay*

"I have been in the hotel trade for the last 40 years, and have spent my career running mostly large four-star corporate hotels in all parts of Scotland," begins Burgess. "Five years ago two opportunities presented themselves for me to combine my love of golf with my professional career. We own the Sandown House in Nairn, a B&B which is part of our family home, and I manage a five-star luxury guest house called Meldrum House in Oldmeldrum, north of Aberdeen, which is an idyllic country mansion with a private championship golf course. I feel that both projects represent the very best in their respective markets."

Burgess truly knows the meaning of the word "hospitality." It was a chance encounter with him at last January's PGA Show in Orlando that precipitated the invitation to come visit the Highlands, a journey undertaken this past September that in many ways mimicked my first golf foray to the UK a dozen years ago. While this encore visit included some old favorites (Nairn, Royal Dornoch and Cruden Bay serving as the "Big Three"), it also included some superb venues that weren't off the drawing board in 2001, including Castle Stuart and Trump International. I thought then and have reconfirmed since that the Highlands, visually stunning and the road less traveled, is home to some of the best golf in the world.

Someday Donald Trump might build a showpiece hotel alongside his recently unveiled, shiny new golf course. Until that day comes (if it ever does, as he is currently embroiled in various litigations) the Meldrum House is certainly one of the top nearby choices. Its 27 rooms are divided between the main castle-like structure (do not miss the low-ceilinged, cellar-style bar off the mail lobby that drips with ambience), the chain lodge and the stables. It is a short walk from each building to the next, and while all are different in styles they are linked by quality and attention to detail.

The golf course, just a five-minute stroll away, is also different in style than the classic links expected to find in Scotland. This parkland-style gem, rife with ponds and wetlands, is a thinker's course. Greens are subtly tricky, doglegs abound, the layout ebbs and flows up and down the estate's terrain, and architect Graeme Webster did an exemplary job of building a "resort course" that has far more to offer than simply convenient access to the hotel. This is a course that stands and delivers on its own merits.

Good as the Meldrum House Golf Club is, it is in an altogether different category than fabulous Cruden Bay Golf Club on the extreme eastern edge of the country, perhaps a 30-minute drive from the Meldrum House. This is the type of links people travel across oceans for - the golf of one's dreams. Massive sand dunes covered with long and wavy marram grasses are two of the major features on display at this superbly remote outpost, where all the members aren't caddies, but all the caddies happen to be members.

The course is set in a figure-8 pattern. It begins on higher ground near the clubhouse, slowly winds to the sea and then returns again. Much of the course is eccentric, but the seaside holes especially are unlike anything most folks have seen before. Tom Simpson set up the 6,400-yard course in 1899 using a pick and shovel. The holes were fit in between the dunes in exacting fashion, and the end result is curious, to say the least. Would you believe three consecutive blind greens, one a par-3?

Many links are bereft of drastic elevation changes. But this part of Scotland, including stalwarts like Royal Aberdeen and Murcar to the south, is full of elevated tee shots and uphill climbs to raised greens. Cruden Bay is the king of the hills, however. From the ninth fairway the stark beauty of the jagged cliffs south of the links tumbling down to the sea is as dramatic a view as you'll likely ever encounter on golf course. To the north are the remains of Old Slains Castle, now decrepit and roofless as to avoid taxes. More than a century ago it inspired a young writer on vacation in the area, an Irishman named Abraham Stoker. Most readers have doubtless heard of his most famous work, a novel called "Dracula." The town of Cruden Bay invigorated Bram Stoker, and golfers lucky enough to find their way to this course are inspired as well.



*The 15th at Cruden Bay Golf Club (C [linksland.com](http://linksland.com))*

Just as inspired as any random, links-loving golf tourist is Les Durno, who joined as a junior member in 1970 before twists and turns (mimicking the course's landscape) led him to become Cruden Bay's general manager in 2012. "I am extremely privileged to be in charge of such a prestigious and recognized golf course," begins the local product.

"The natural shapes and hollows of the land, following a figure of eight 'round the Bay of Cruden, with stunning views of the beach and the backdrop of the castle ruins. It offers 18 majestic holes and a view from the clubhouse which is simply second to none. The run of holes from four to seven, into the prevailing wind are a test for any golfer in the world, no wonder Cruden Bay is on the bucket list for avid golfers from around the globe."

"2013 has been a banner year," continues Durno. "Following our Golf Tourism Scotland Award in 2012, we have had a fantastic season with visitors from all corners - UK, USA, Canada, Japan, China, Germany, France, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, the list is endless. The word has certainly spread. The recent opening and marketing by the nearby Trump International development has also raised the awareness of the area worldwide."

Ah, Trump - the five-letter name that doubles as a four-letter word. Like any red-blooded American golfer I was prepared to detest Trump International. However, if one is open-minded enough to separate the golf course from the bombastic self-promoter who conceived and executed it, one word will come to mind: exquisite.

Here the dunes are massive, the bunkers intimidating, the gorse creeps and encroaches from every direction. The elevation changes are exhilarating, the greens heave, pitch and roll like the nearby North Sea, the par-3s require a sniper's precision, and all things considered this is a superb golf experience, despite the fear factor, which is sky-high. It isn't quite "the greatest golf course in the world" like the owner trumpets, but it is an absolute "must-play" if in the area.

What is astonishing is the conditioning of the golf course. Cruden Bay cannot be 20 miles as the crow flies from Trump. But while that antiquity is undoubtedly one of the most memorable and purely fun experiences on planet golf, here is the unvarnished truth: There is more manicured grass on the Trump footpaths - snaking in all different directions to the myriad sets of tees and heading down to the fairways - than what exists in the whole of Cruden Bay.



*10th at Trump International Scotland  
(Photo Courtesy of Trump International Scotland)*

Then again, it has to be that way. The cognoscenti come from all over the globe to experience the classic, timeless links of Scotland and the Highlands. The hardscrabble appearance of many of the links courses is part of their quirky charm. But Trump is held to a different standard, and without a 100-year history, he must deliver an experience above and beyond to attract both the discerning international traveler and any sort of local following. He does so in spades, in conditioning and in service, and with a golf course that in its own way stands up to the legendary links found dotting Scotland's coastline and to the west.

Trump has brought plenty of jobs to Aberdeenshire, and more importantly, will bring thousands of tourists and millions of pounds to the area in terms of hotel

bookings, bar tabs, restaurants, taxi fares, tips and the like. But while those in the hospitality business are gung ho, the fact is the vibrant oil business in and around Aberdeen (you can see the offshore oil rigs) keeps unemployment rates in the very low single figures.

Trump's project, while visionary and breathtaking, won't have nearly the same effect on the area as Mike Keiser had on the Oregon Coast when he conceived and constructed Bandon Dunes Resort. Coastal Oregon, once its traditional logging and fishing industries faltered, withered into financial irrelevance and became an item on a short list of America's most-depressed regions. Keiser, a greeting-card magnate with one-millionth the name and face recognition as "The Donald," revitalized the region with his amazing concept of true links golf - walkers only - in the USA. Trump cannot replicate the same turnaround due to the simple fact that the Aberdeenshire economy is already vital.

For more Information, visit [www.meldrumhouse.com](http://www.meldrumhouse.com), [www.crudenbaygolfclub.co.uk](http://www.crudenbaygolfclub.co.uk) and [www.trumpgolfsotland.com](http://www.trumpgolfsotland.com).

Part 2 - Off to Nairn, Castle Stuart & Royal Dornoch, Among Others